

At Savarese Fights in Houston, They Come To See Fights, Not Fighters

Written by Kelsey McCarson
Saturday, 03 August 2013 13:40



The Bayou City Events Center, located just on the outskirts of Houston, is a relatively small venue. Essentially, the frequent host to former heavyweight contender Lou Savarese's promotional ventures in pugilism is three large ballrooms.

Savarese sets up shop in the middle ballroom. The blue ring is tattered and worn, but the ropes are tight and the floor is flat. Around the ring, Savarese sets up reserved tables for sponsors and high-priced ticket buyers. They are dressed in something only a bit less than their Sunday bests, insomuch as some of the men wear t-shirts tucked into their jeans and the ladies on their arms are adorned for something more licentious than prayer.

Behind them, others sit. There are chairs without tables lined all around and the dress code gets less strict and scantier with each meter of distance. Each seat is pointed directly toward the object of attention: that tired blue ring that holds the fighters dancing upon it perfectly high enough for everyone to see.

And the people pack in to see it. Many of them have to stand along the walls.

This is local boxing at its best. Savarese has perfected it. Unlike bigger shows, fans here do not come to see stars. Sure, these men can build local fan bases and dream of something more than entrance music, but for the most part those in attendance are here to see fights, not fighters.

The boxers congregate together in the ballroom to the left. Red corner, blue corner, it doesn't matter. There are no dressing rooms here, just a large, open space to get taped up, loosened and warmed before entering the fray.

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Welterweights Felipe Reyes and Jonathan O'Neal open the action. The rangy O'Neal wants to make it a jabbing contest, but his compact Mexican friend, Reyes, will have none of it. Reyes is a pressure fighter. He likes to brawl, and he has a good enough chin to do it. Like any fighter wearing trunks emblazoned with the Mexican flag, Reyes digs hooks to the body like a demon. But O'Neal is tough, and when it's proven it won't be a jabbing contest, the tough welterweight, who slightly resembles Paul Williams, obliges his opponent by letting his hands go, too. Reyes comes forward in the first and takes punches to the head and body just as he intends, all the while digging to O'Neal's torso.

In the second, O'Neal's corner is screaming at him. "Box him! Get off the ropes! Box him! Box him, O'Neal! Box him!"

It is easier said than done, and the rest of the fight proves it. O'Neal is hurt in the third. He's right where he's not supposed to be, the corner, and Reyes is making him pay. But O'Neal is a tough customer, and he's game enough to make Reyes work for it. O'Neal seems to figure things out a bit at the start of the fourth. He's moving his feet better and catching Reyes on the way in, but the marauder keeps on coming forward anyway. By the middle of the round, O'Neal is too tired to keep it up. The final round's bell is merciful to him.

Judges at ringside score the fight as they so often do, for the fighter moving forward. Reyes gets the nod 40-36, 40-36 and 39-37.

Next up are light heavyweights Jeremy Hall and Joseph Walker. Hall, in blue and white trunks, carries a high guard and works behind a jab. Walker, in black trunks with a white stripe down each leg, carries his hands low, moves laterally and tries to get his thicker body behind hooks and uppercuts. It's no good. Hall hits him early and often in the first, and has him hurt twice before the bell sounds.

Walker has a good corner. They tell him to use a jab and he does so with success in the second. He's a different fighter for the opening minute, but a hard right hand from Hall reminds him he's not the boss tonight. Soon, he's getting pummeled again, despite giving Walker different sorts of targets by changing back and forth from orthodox to southpaw.

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“Move, Joe!” his corner yells at him in the third. He’s not, though, and after getting shellacked on the ropes some more, he seems even more discouraged than ever. Before long, he’s corralled into a corner. Next, he’s in another. Then another. He makes it out of the set, perhaps bolstered by the counter right hand he landed on Hall’s chin toward the end of it.

Surprise! Hall switches stances at the start of the fourth, too. Soon, he’s back orthodox though, and he’s clubbing Walker with hooks and overhand rights just like always.

“Get off the ropes, Joe!” says his corner. “Defend yourself,” whispers the referee who wants to stop it.

Walker does both just enough to make it to the end of the round. Judges at ringside award the bout to Hall, 40-36 all three ways.

Next, it’s cruiserweight Hasam Mohamed taking on light heavyweight Robert Hill at a catch weight of 185 pounds. Both men are muscular and in shape, but it is clear from the outset how much larger the cut up Mohamed is.

Mohamed’s a jabber, but throws it, and everything else coming behind it, like you just called his mother something terrible. His eyes pop out of his head and he wears a scowl with every mean blow, but he doesn’t land any of them with the authority he throws them with. The professional novice is reckless.

Still, Hill learns enough at the start of it to know he doesn’t want to trade too much leather with Mohamed. He covers up, then ducks down to grab mean Mohamed in between careful jabs and right crosses. The second is more of the same: wild and angry swings, tugging and grabbing, frowns and snarls. Mohamed lets it get to him a bit, and starts leading with his head enough to have a point deducted. Later on, he’s reaching back far as he can like he’s throwing a baseball and hurling his fist at his easily prepared by now opponent with everything he’s got.

Something like a boxing match breaks out early in the third. Both are jabbing at each other for a bit, but it devolves into more ugly chaos soon enough. The grey haired referee scolds them like

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schoolboys but it doesn't matter. Things don't change. Hill lands some clean counters here and there to maybe take the round.

The final round is the same. The burr-headed Mohamed looks and fights like a football player. He lands more shoulders than fists. On the other hand, Hill fights with more precision but carries himself as if he wouldn't make the team altogether.

The end result is a split decision win for Robert Hill. Judges score it twice for him, 39-36, 38-37, and once for Mohamed, 38-37.

The sweet science returns to form by way of junior middleweights Jonathan Casimere and Booker Arthur. They're quick, skilled and respectful of boxing's dogmas. Casimere is polite. He greets his opponent, Arthur, before they start the fight with a fist bump. After the bell rings, though, the shorter Arthur is greeted with long, straight right hands over the top of his guard.

The second round is more of the same, though now Casimere is mixing in hooks. Arthur takes a good punch. He wears black trunks and high gray socks, each adorned with Batman's black and yellow bat symbol. The pace quickens in the third, mostly because Casimere seems more intent to end things. He tires himself out, though, so Arthur gets a bat-flurry in while he rests. Emboldened, Arthur rushes in as fast as he can. Casimere sidesteps him and let's Arthur run face first into the ropes. On the rebound, he cracks Arthur up top to the head. It's nice work, though slightly behind the head. The two fight in a phone booth for the rest of it, and trade flurries until they hear the crack of the bell.

The final round is a crackerjack. The two men fight passionately toe-to-toe for three full minutes. Both want to win, and it shows. It isn't Figueroa-Arakawa but it works.

Judges give the fight to Casimere by majority decision. The scores read 39-37, 39-37 and 38-38.

Featherweights Pablo Cruz and Heron Saucedo Jr. come out next. Saucedo is proud of his entrance music, until he realizes Cruz, the 2011 national champion of El Salvador, is coming in

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to the sounds of an entire live drum section. Cruz wears blue shorts and dances to the rhythmic sounds of his minions. His people are louder than anyone else here, and they set themselves apart by wearing blue shirts with their fighter's name on them.

Cruz has quality. He's fast handed and skilled. Saucedo is no chump, but he's getting beaten in just about all facets of the game right from the get go. Team Cruz loves it. Chants begin. "Pablo! Pablo! Pablo! Pablo!"

Cruz catches Saucedo clean with a counter right hand in the second, and soon he's strafed him enough to bring blood spurting from his nose. The ringside doctor says he's good to go, so Cruz continues his patient onslaught. The third starts as the second ended, more patient stalking by Cruz, more cautious circling and brave strike attempts by Saucedo. Here comes the blood again. The crowd chants when they see it. Cruz is breaking him down now.

The fourth round is just a river of blood streaming from Saucedo's nose. His arm is covered in it, and Cruz does all he can to make it stay that way. It splatters on top of the writer at ringside from The Sweet Science who keeps typing anyway.

All three judges score the fight for the fighter who made it rain blood, Pablo Cruz. He leaves to what isn't just a drum section, but a full band of happy worshippers dancing and cheering for him with a giant El Salvareoan flag.

Lightweight Omar Tello does his best to outdo Cruz. Tello, of Houston, has a boisterous crowd of onlookers cheering and chanting for him, too. "Tello! Tello! Tello!" they yell. Opponent Jose Rangel tries a good ol' fashioned blitzkrieg approach at the start to shut them up, but is quickly countered and sent reeling. A right hand stuns him. Soon, he's getting blitzkrieged himself right back to the adjacent corner. Tello puts him down to his knee with a quick combination and that is where he stays until he is counted out at 56 seconds of the first round.

The crowd never stops cheering.

It's time for the heavyweights. Roberto Silva Jr., the hometown kid, drapes himself with a cape

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over his robe that is also the Mexican flag. This goes over well with people in attendance. His pudgy counterpart, Emmanuel Calzada, is the kind of fighter you expect when you see he's wearing tennis shoes instead of those designed for the ring. He looks hurried and resorts to hastily thrown haymakers whenever he decides to let his hands go.

The ring quakes from the men's girth, though they appear normal by heavyweight standards.

A hard right hand sends Calzada down fast in the first, but the referee rules it a rabbit punch. No matter, Silva is pummeling him pillar to post again soon enough. Calzada makes it through the first, even landing a straight right hand in the round to prove he knows how to do it. The two men tire in the second, especially Calzada who is eating hard jabs and power shots. The crowd goes wild for the kid, though, when he finally lands some of those haymakers. In the third, Silva crushes Calzada to the body, then follows it up twice up stairs to break the kid's nose. The bout is halted at 56 seconds of round 3 with Calzada on his feet but bewildered by the impact.

Super middleweight Gianni Giambi and Cody Perez are the last four-rounder tonight. The bald-headed Giambi has a tattoo under his heart in the shape of Texas, and he fights like a bull. He aggressively charges his prey, Perez, who appears the sheep tonight. He's got a white cross stitched onto his black shorts along with "Psalm 144:1" underneath.

Giambi pounds Perez to the ropes and heads in fast for the kill. It's too fast.

Perez, whose bible verse indicates he possesses hands trained by God for battle, lands a perfect right hand counter across Giambi's chin. His head snaps around like a pinwheel and he crashes down hard to the canvas. He's out. It's a brutal, devastating blow that leaves Giambi flat on his back, under the ropes and halfway into a judge's lap. It's scary for a bit, but he makes it back from dreamland and gets to his feet. He looks more embarrassed than injured.

The final bout of the night is junior welterweight Daniel Garcia against Juan Serrano. Garcia is the headliner tonight. His pompadour head is clean, and his body is fit and lean. He's a good fighter, the kind you can tell has spent long hours at the gym honing his craft. This opponent, Serrano, is a mystery, but he carries himself as if he's the same as Garcia. He's got thick arms but skinny legs. Both have the look of fighters. You know it when you see it. It's there.

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The first round opens with jabs. Garcia is light and nimble. His arms are shorter than his opponents, but he glides across our blue floor like a cloud of smoke. He's just close enough to punch, it seems, whenever he wants to be. He doubles and triples the jab when he's there, and blocks the returns as he leaves. Jab established, Garcia starts bringing in his right hand, too. Sometimes it is straight like a knife. Other times, it loops back behind his opponent's ear like a slinky. He's winning.

In between the first and second rounds, Garcia stands in the corner. His trunks say "six pounds, ten ounces" on the left leg. The front says "Garcia," the back, "Perez." Meanwhile, Serrano sits and listens intently to his corner. No doubt, they're telling him to keep the shorter Garcia at the end of his longer punches. His blue, black and white shorts look like swim trunks.

Serrano does his best to do as his corner told him in the second. Garcia's head is snapped back to the sky by a jab he just missed blocking. Serrano does more of it, and follows it up with hooks and uppercuts. Garcia changes now. He's moving laterally and trying to leap inside to do damage instead of boxing like before. Serrano sees it, and pops Garcia with a right hand that stuns him. Garcia has to hold on to gather his wits.

Garcia can't seem to block the jab anymore in the third. It's hitting him, so he decides to move in closer and throw combinations. A left hook catches Serrano off balance and stumbles him ever so slightly. Garcia is pleased. He sends a sharp jab to Serrano's body, then ducks and dodges the return. Garcia is back in control. The round ends with a looping right hand to Serrano's head. He's not hurt, but Garcia's punches are landing more and more now.

The two stand up to each other in the fourth. It's time to find out what is what. Garcia lands his shots, but finds out Serrano's are harder. He's dazed a bit and tries to use his legs to no avail. Seconds before the bell rings, Garcia is dumped to the canvas by a clean left hook. He makes it to his feet quickly, receives the obligatory count to 8 and heads back to his corner to recalibrate.

Serrano's long punches are landing harder in the fifth. He's keeping Garcia on the end of them like his corner wants, and he's getting lots of torque for them out of his twisting hips. Garcia lands a hook inside on the ropes, but Serrano shakes it off. Serrano is the stalker now. Garcia can't keep him off. Serrano blisters Garcia with an uppercut, but it is taken well. Garcia recovers with quick combos in close, but they are mostly arm punches now. The thunder in the round is

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landed by Serrano.

The final round is here. It's almost time to go home now. Tomorrow is Friday, so most everyone here will peel themselves out of bed in the morning and head to work. It's time to finish the drinks and start getting ready to head home for the night. The sold out crowd is restless.

Serrano is patient in the sixth, but he can tell Garcia is tiring so he can't help but trap him up against the ropes. Garcia has to hold on again after a right hook, but once he gathers himself he's right back at it. Garcia fights to the bitter end, as does Serrano. It's a good, clean fight, the kind fight fans come out to the Bayou City Events Center in Houston to see. The gregarious Savarese, who's tasted the power of George Foreman, Mike Tyson and Evander Holyfield, has done it again.

Judges score the fight for mystery man, Serrano, by split decision. The scores are 58-55 and 57-56 for Serrano, and 57-56 Garcia. A night at the fights in Houston is over.

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